OUTCOMES MEASUREMENT BASICS

Why are we talking about outcomes measurement?

The US Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the federal agency that oversees the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA), has asked California and other selected states to implement outcomes measurement (OM) in their field grant projects. Although OM is a new concept to many public libraries, social service agencies, elementary education departments and community colleges have been using this approach to plan and evaluate programs since the early 1980s. Federal government agencies began using OM after Congress passed the Government Performances and Results Act (GRPA) in 1993 to ensure greater accountability of government services to the taxpayers.

Many state agencies have adopted the practice and now county and city governments may require it also. At the same time, private funders and foundations began looking for results accountability, which includes outcomes measurement. In 1995, United Way incorporated OM into their program evaluation requirements and since then it has becme commonplace.

OM has many benefits to the library. It makes us examine our assumptions about library services and programs. It re-energizes staff because it focuses on the real-life human results of what they do. In both the planning and evaluation stages, it helps clarify not only what we do but why we do it so that we stay on track for our community.

In a 2000 study of 391 United Way-funded programs that had used OM for 2 or more years, 89% of the program directors indicated that they would recommend OM to other directors. They agreed that OM was helpful to them and their staff members in communicating program results (88%), focusing staff efforts on common goals and purposes (88%), clarifying the purpose of the program (86%), identifying effective practices (84%) and, and successfully competing for resources/funding (83%).

What is outcomes measurement?

Outcomes measurement (OM) is a user-centered approach to assessment of programs that are based on user needs and designed to achieve change. In the next few pages, we will break apart the definition to discuss what OM is and how libraries may use it as a planning and evaluation tool.

OM -- also known as outcome-based evaluation, outcome assessment, or results-based evaluation -- is a component of planning and assessment that focuses on program impact. Most libraries systematically measure their inputs (resources) and their outputs (activities). In other words, most evaluations are library-oriented and count what the

library staff does. These are outputs. For example, how many books did the library circulate? How many reference questions did staff answer? How many programs did staff present? Libraries also count the costs of providing services; they count their resources or inputs. These are all important questions; libraries should continue to count their resources and what they do. Such information helps libraries evaluate their internal processes and assess their efficiency. The library's perceived value is usually related to these measures of the quality and quantity of effort.

OM is an additional way to assess library services and programs, one that has a very different perspective. As an aptly named journal article put it "From the user in the life of the library to the library in the life of the user." In OM the questions are user-oriented. For example, what has changed for the users as a result of our programs or services? How did our program make a difference in the lives of our users? By tracking the impact of their services and programs, libraries evaluate their effectiveness.

We all have wonderful anecdotes about the effects of library services on patron's lives, warm and fuzzy human-interest stories that our stakeholders love to hear. For example, a regular user stopped by to tell us that he got a new job as a result of our resume writing workshop. Or a mother reports that her children are doing better in school because she can help them with their homework as a result of our literacy program. These types of human impact, or outcomes, are planned for and then assessed in OM. In other words, OM helps us quantify our users' success stories to demonstrate the library's value in terms of quality of effect. Unlike anecdotes that are fortuitously shared and often surprise us, the outcomes measured in OM are planned for and reflect our expectations of a program or service.

How do libraries use outcomes measurement?

In order to use OM, a library must define a community need and a library goal before creating a new program or service. Then it must select realistic outcomes that it hopes to achieve for its users before designing a program or service. Indicators of change must be identified. During and after the new program or service, data is collected to see if the program had the intended impact. In other words, assessment reveals whether the library achieved the expected outcomes -- usually reported in the amount of change in behavior, attitude, skills, knowledge or condition (situation). The library also sets a target or standard of success for itself to demonstrate whether the program is having impact on as many people as possible.

Let's take an example through those OM steps. Anytown, California is concerned about the unemployment rate among young adults who have dropped out of high school. The city council and the mayor have asked the school district and other departments to focus on this issue in their planning. A study done by a local non-profit organization found that at-risk students need personalized homework assistance, access to resources, and increased self-confidence about the possibilities of future employment if they are to graduate from high school. The Anytown Public Library decides that it will

address this community need and so defines a library goal: To provide teens with homework assistance and curriculum support materials so that they can succeed in school. The library initiates 24/7 electronic homework help as well as in-person tutoring at the library by older adult volunteers.

The outcome the library hopes to achieve is that participating young adults will be more successful in school. The indicators are that participating teens will improve their school attendance and their grades. More specifically, during the next two years the students will double the number of days that they attend school and will increase their grade point average by one point. In other words the library is aiming for changes in behavior and knowledge by the participating youth.

Because the library's outcome assumes that students will use the new services over a two year period, an intermediate outcome is also defined. The intermediate outcome is that students will use tutoring and/or electronic homework help and rate the services as helpful. In this case, if the students do not use the new library services and consider them beneficial, the long range outcome can never be met. The indicator for the intermediate outcome is that students will report that one or more of the new services is helping them with their school work.

The high schools partner with the library by identifying at-risk students and promoting the new library service to these teens. The schools also provide the library with baseline information (data) on the students including the number of days attending school and their grade point averages. At the end of the school year the school provides updated attendance and GPA information so that the library can assess whether the program achieved its outcome of greater success in school. This is the data collection method for the long range outcome. For the intermediate outcome, the library will collect information by doing in-person and telephone interviews with a random sample of the at-risk students identified by the school.

The library also sets itself a target of 50%, stating that 50% of the identified students will rate the services as helpful. The library also sets a long range target of 75%, stating that it plans that 75% of the participating students will double the number of days they attend school and will increase their grade point average by one point.

Note that the Anytown Library could also measure other outcomes for the students such as improved self-esteem or improved communication with elders. And it could measure outcomes for the senior volunteers as well.

Note too that the Anytown Library did not take on the entire community problem of unemployment among young adults but set its own goal to be both realistic and relevant to its mission. The library did not work alone but partnered with the high schools. And the library could not accept full responsibility – credit or blame – for the outcome because many other factors influenced the students' success in schools. But the library could show a positive change in the behavior of the young adults who had participated in the program.

Where do we begin to develop an outcomes measurement plan?

As you've seen in the example above, the outcomes measurement plan includes a statement of library goals, services, outcomes, indicators, data collection methods, and targets. You have already identified a community need and developed a library goal in response to that need; your grant project proposal describes one or more services related to the goal. Your next step is to identify one or more outcomes; everything else follows.

First brainstorm outcomes with staff. Ask "Who benefits from this service/ program and how?" Ask them for anecdotes and success stories that speak to the impact of the service. Note that talking to staff will not yield all the outcomes; members of the population group you plan to serve will probably identify more outcomes. Next, interview or hold focus groups with current and past participants. Ask "If this program really helps you, how will you be better off?" or "What do you expect to change for you as a result of this program?""

You should also talk with staff and volunteers who work directly with your intended participants at other programs at your library or elsewhere. Ask "What changes might we see in participants if our program is successful?" Talk with representatives of agencies that might be the "next step" for former participants. Ask "What will participants need to know or be able to do in order to succeed in your program?"

A good tool for testing your ideas is the *"if-then*" chain of influences and benefits. If your program does such and such, what change in the participants can you expect? One of the great benefits of OM is that it forces us to make our assumptions explicit. This tool starts the process of stating the assumptions.

Continuing with the Anytown example from above, think through the chain this way:

- ✓ *If* students have assistance with their homework → *then* they will do better at their school work. *If* they do better at school → *then* they will get better grades and attend school more regularly.

- ✓ *If* they get better grades and attend school more regularly → *then* they are more likely to graduate. *If* they graduate → *then* they are more likely to become employed.

Be sure that the *If* and the *Then* phrases relate to each other and are realistic. If so, you have probably selected an appropriate outcome.

If your outcome is not achievable during the project year, you should also identify an intermediate outcome. This is a result that is necessary in order to achieve the long

range outcome. In many cases, the intermediate outcome is satisfaction with a service or increased use of a service.

In writing your outcome (or intermediate outcome), begin the sentence with the participant (e.g. high school teens); the participant must be the subject of the outcome statement. Check your selected outcome(s) to be sure that it is not an internal program operation (e.g. recruiting and training staff) or an output (e.g. number of participants served.) Be sure that you have not written an objective. Objectives are used in traditional evaluation plans, are written from the library point of view, and express projected outputs with a timeline.

Once you have selected outcome(s) it is relatively simple to identify one or more indicators. Ask yourself: How will we know that the participants experienced the expected benefit or change? An indicator is a behavior that actually demonstrates the change or that implies it. In the Anytown example above, the selected outcome is that participating young adults will be more successful in school. The indicators are that participating teens will double the number of days that they attend school and will increase their grade point average by one point during the semester.

Be sure that the indicator is specific, unambiguous, objective, and measurable. It must be both valid (i.e. different people agree on its meaning) and reliable (i.e. remains the same in different situations). Outcomes – such as "more successful" – are made clear and measurable by the indicators.

Before you go on, it is important to take another look at the program/ service you are proposing. It may need some tweaking now that you've considered outcomes and indicators. Have you selected the best possible program/ service to achieve the outcome(s)?

What else must we do for the outcomes measurement plan?

In order to select a data collection method, think about the indicator. Two key questions are: What is evidence of the indicator? How can we obtain that evidence? For the school success example, proof of attendance and grades are in the records of the school district. To use an information literacy example, an indicator of increased skill at using online resources might be test scores, obtained by giving class participants a written test. Or it might be the fact that participants use the online resources independently; such information may be collected by staff observation or from self-report.

The most common data collection methods are surveys, interviews, observation, standardized tests, self-report, and review of existing records. You will determine which data collection method to use by considering what you need to know, where the information may already be available, and which methodology is simplest for both staff and participants. However you collect the data from individual participants, keep in mind

that results are always aggregated and only reported by group. In other words, you never report “Joe attended school more regularly.” Instead you will report that “75% of the teens attended school more regularly.”

The last piece of the OM plan is the target. Unlike the other components of OM, the target is about the library rather than the user. How will we know if the program has met our expectations? What is our standard for success for the program?

It is extremely difficult to select a reasonable target for a new program. Instead, during the first year track your outcome(s) and indicator(s). Then in the following years you can use them as baseline data to set realistic targets. To be useful, targets must always be reasonable and based on experience.

Here is another library example of an OM plan. In a job information program, an expected long range outcome might be that participants find a new or better job. An intermediate outcome might be that participants learn of new job and career options. For the intermediate outcome, an indicator might be the number and percentage of participants who list two or more additional jobs/ career possibilities after the program than before. The data collection method is a simple five question written survey given to participants at the beginning and end of the program. A target might be that 40% of participants list at least 2 more careers options.